

New study highlights the role of risk communication in coping with COVID-19

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The mental effects of pandemics on people can arise not only from the burden of preventive measures, the fear of contracting and cure but also coping with the exponential deaths. It was predicted in 2018 that the next

major outbreak and its containment challenges might not be due to a lack of preventive technologies, but to emotional contagion, which could erode trust in government, causing serious economic and social disruption. It is thus crucial to understand the relationship between risk communication and psychological responses, especially in the ascending phase of pandemic, at which public emotions and behaviors in response to the epidemic change rapidly.

In it is in this vein that, psychologists at the International Joint Laboratory of Cognitive and Behavioral Science (iLCBC) at Zhengzhou Normal University have conducted a study on the relationship between [psychological responses](#) and risk communication during the early phase of COVID-19 pandemic to answer the following questions: What is the [public reaction](#) to epidemic outbreaks in the early phase? How does the effective exchange of real-time risk information impact them over time? What are the characteristics of these effects under different risk intensities?

Data was collected from 26 Jan, 2020, at which time 30 Provinces launched the First-level response to major public health emergencies in China, 56 deaths had occurred, and 2,014 cases were confirmed worldwide, until 17 February, 2020, (1,775 deaths and 71,429 confirmed cases worldwide) with the mean test-retest interval of 16 days. The study involved the participation of community residents from two provincial capitals: Wuhan and Zhengzhou.

The findings of the study showed that risk communication in the initial stage of the outbreak mitigated the susceptibility to [emotional contagion](#), and that this interaction had a larger influence on the epidemic frontline (i.e., Wuhan). Furthermore, prevention activities were predicted by the quality of risk communication, suggesting that preventive behaviors taken were closely linked to the efficient and timely transmission of information related to the epidemic. While researchers have found that

effective risk communication may reduce susceptibility to emotional contagion and is a significant means of alleviating public anxiety, it has shown some inconsistencies to previous findings in that there is a reciprocal correlation between anxiety and risk communication, which means that the emotional component may build resistance to risk [communication](#).

In January 2020, Wuhan became the battlefield in the fight against COVID-19 and was the focus of global attention. The data provides some of the first follow-up records regarding [mental health](#) during the COVID-19 outbreak. According to Dr. Zheng Jin, Director of the iLCBC, "Officials trying to circumvent chaos or panic by withholding information are more harmful than the public behaving irrationally in a public health emergency" he says, "Pre-crisis planning is expected to create a transparent, open and honest flow of information."

More information: Zheng Jin et al. Relationship Between Psychological Responses and the Appraisal of Risk Communication During the Early Phase of the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Two-Wave Study of Community Residents in China, *Frontiers in Public Health* (2020). [DOI: 10.3389/fpubh.2020.550220](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2020.550220)

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